

## MEMORANDUM

To: State Board of Education  
From: Raymond McNulty, Commissioner  
Date: January 24, 2002  
Re: Legislative Testimony Regarding Priorities

During my Commissioner's Report at the January meeting of the Vermont State Board of Education, I promised to prepare a comprehensive list of initiatives that I recently discussed with the Education Committees in both the House and Senate. They are as follows:

- ❑ I carefully conveyed the message of our transition; a new commissioner working with the leadership of a state board firmly committed to staying the course set out by our goals and priorities. I spoke of my first few weeks at the department as I get up to speed. I drew the parallel that just as the DOE is in transition, our schools are as well. There has been a blizzard of new legislation over the past five years with far-reaching effects. We need time to adjust to the new laws that address equal educational opportunity, public school choice, safe schools, hazing and harassment, technical education governance and others. I applauded their efforts in being sensitive to the rash of studies and reports hoisted upon the department and the field. The legislature was indeed wise to limit these responsibilities last year and I encouraged them to do the same this year.
- ❑ I referred to Dave Wolk's letter of legislative priorities from last year. I walked them through the many accomplishments and asked them to work with us in helping to achieve progress in:  
Roles and Responsibilities – I informed the committee members of the good work that is moving forward under the leadership of the VSBA, Doug Walker and Jill Mackler. I stressed that their primary responsibility is not to rewrite the statutes, but to focus on our turnover rate of school administrators and educator quality issues.  
Dropouts and Truancy - We spoke about compulsory attendance. I stressed the notion that kids should not be "sentenced to school." I offered my ideas about creative support for students who choose not to attend school after the age of sixteen. How we can offer courses for them out of conventional school time, bring them back into the school community when they are ready and assist them in transition to work roles in our community if and when school is not the proper solution should be part of our mission.
- ❑ I asked the committees to work with us in supporting our budget. Bill Talbott had previously testified before the House Education Committee regarding the impact of the recissions on the FY'02 budget of the department. Representative Martha Heath

will, once again, be responsible for presenting the education budget to the House Appropriations Committee. Representatives George Cross and Kathy LaVoie, will lead the budget review process through the committee of jurisdiction.

- ❑ We will present an omnibus clean-up bill for consideration. This will include various technical issues we have identified over the past year that should be addressed this session. This will fall into two categories. The first category involves strictly technical problems that require non-controversial simple fixes. The second category involves technical problems for which the fixes are either potentially complex or controversial.
- ❑ I requested that the legislature consider supporting the opportunity for a community to approve a thirty-year school construction bond. Communities are limited to a twenty-year maximum period on school construction projects but not on other municipal ventures. I believe that construction projects that will last for future generations should be extended to ease burden, if the community deems this approach to be proper. H. 549 has been introduced and is under consideration.
- ❑ I took the opportunity to, once again, deliver my message regarding the importance of early education that I consider most important. I shared with committee members the disproportionate way in which we fund education considering the rate of growth of the human brain as a child grows from zero to five years of age. I asked the committee members to work with us in a long term planning process to consider methods of reversing this trend so that we can invest in prevention rather than intervention.
- ❑ I encouraged the legislators to support a bill seeking a uniform date of entry for kindergarten. There is presently a wide disparity from school to school, district to district, between September 1<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup> as the cut-off date for kindergarten entry. A union high school may have five differently elementary schools that it draws from, all with different age requirements upon entry. This is not the best way to prepare students to come to school ready to learn. It also places an unnecessary burden upon our educators who must teach classes with a wider level of ability and maturity than is ideal. I propose September 1<sup>st</sup> as a cut-off date for kindergarten entry and that we make it effective in the school year 2004-2005 so that families and schools have adequate time to adjust.
- ❑ I asked the committee members to support efforts that provide innovation in education. I spoke from my experience in providing options such as the John Dewey School in Brattleboro. There are many opportunities for creative educators, administrators and community members to work with the State Board of Education and the Department to design schools and methods of learning that are creative and more effective than a cookie cutter approach would provide.
- ❑ I asked that they take a close look at the Act 138 Report on Technical Education. We need to begin the discussion of affordability and equity regarding technical center

construction. I conveyed some of my concerns regarding the Chittenden County Regional Technical Academy proposal. Issues relating to this project include enrollment, funding, school construction, governance, co-location and our priority system.

- ❑ In regard to the issue of school choice, I asked that the legislature give Act 150 an opportunity to work. Collaborative arrangements have been established and high schools are gearing up for full implementation next year. I believe that we need to establish school choice and follow through on the studies that this Act requires in a guarded manner before we tackle the question of whether we expand the program or have money follow the student.
- ❑ We discussed the passage of the reauthorization of ESEA. I informed the members that the department is conducting an exhaustive review of the implications that the changes in federal law will have on our programs and provision of services. I asked for their patience in this process, as the information will be slow in coming but very important indeed.
- ❑ Finally, I informed the committee members of the various reports that the department was involved in completing. They include Act 117 (Educational Supports), Act 34 (Cost Reallocations of Special Education), Restrictive Behavioral Interventions and Act 138 (Technical Education). I also shared my anticipation of reports that the legislature was working on that include: Out of School/After School Programs, Charter Schools and Youth at Risk.